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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses in detail the educational groups for single parents, which are one aspect of a larger research project on preventive educational interventions for divorcing families called the Parenting After Divorce project. A review of the literature is presented focusing on group interventions for adults from both the adult and the parent-child perspectives. An overview of the project is given including its purpose, programs, goals, population, methods, and assessment instruments. A description of the design and composition of the parent groups, including membership, organization, and leaders, follows. A detailed description of the five group sessions is given including: (1) reactions of children to divorce; (2) active listening and direct expression of feelings; (3) limit setting and negotiation; (4) ongoing relationship between divorced parents; and (5) problem solving and future plans. The remainder of the paper elaborates on the clinical issues which emerged in running the groups, including the limitations of the educational format, leader role, structured vs. unstructured groups, working through separation issues while talking about parenting, leader techniques, recruitment and screening of participants, timing of group offerings, and leader preparation and qualifications. A comment on consumer satisfaction ratings concludes the paper. (BL)

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Parenting After Divorce

Educational Groups for Single Parents

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Parenting After Divorce:
Educational Groups for Single Parents

Introduction:

I am going to talk today about a divorce group for parents which has been offered as part of a larger research project on preventive educational interventions for divorcing families called the Parenting After Divorce project. A more detailed report on the whole research project including specific information about group effectiveness will be completed by next spring. I will be talking some about consumer satisfaction ratings of these groups today. During the past 2 and 1/2 years, we have offered this parent group 11 times. The group was designed to fit the needs of families and of the research, and the circumstances of the divorce law in our state. We have found that programs like these need to be tailored not only to the needs of the population served, but also to the state in which one is working, and the time in the divorce process at which families come. Thus, I present these groups in some detail as one model you can work from to design programs for divorcing parents in your area.

Literature Review:

Group interventions for adults are structured in many ways, and include different types of content. Programs can be characterized as crisis intervention, therapeutic, educational, skill building, primarily supportive and self help in nature (U.S. DHHS Monograph, 1980). Groups may target issues involved in parenting, or may focus on the feelings and needs of divorcing adults. A number of groups have been described in the literature, but only a few of the programs have included formal evaluation or research of the effectiveness of the program.

Adult Focus: Some groups help adults deal with their feelings and restructure their lives following divorce. Not specifically for parents, groups such as these are for anyone who is experiencing divorce. Weiss (1976) described a pioneering group based on principles of crisis intervention and work with families in "transition states" which he called Seminars for the Separated. These groups focused on issues such as mourning and loss, dealing with friends and family about the divorce, talking with children about the divorce, and dating and establishing new relationships. The Seminars were educational in nature, and included a lecture followed by a discussion group session. Other educational groups for separated adults have included skill building as well, such as the program described by Theissen and his colleagues (1980) which taught empathy and communication skills to divorcing women. Sheila Kessler (1978) has written about divorce groups which focus on education, values clarification and skill building using videotape vignettes as stimulus material for the group sessions. Other groups, such as those described by Granvold and Welch (1977) and Shelton and Nix (1979) have used Cognitive Behavioral or RET principles to help divorcing adults deal with the feelings following separation and divorce. Some programs run for many weeks (such as the groups of Stolberg (1983) --12-20 weeks) while others provide information in a brief workshop format (such as the 4 hour workshops reported by Young, 1978).

Parent-Child Focus: Some groups, similar to the ones which we have been doing in the PAD project, are more focused on PARENTING issues for divorcing parents. Barnett (1980), of the Family Service Association of America, and Miyares of the Center for Children in Family Crisis (reported in U.S. DHHS Monograph, 1980) describe group programs which provide specific information on parenting skills and the reactions of children to parental divorce.

Evaluation of parent groups has found that consumer satisfaction is quite high (Young, 1978; Weiss, 1976; Davidoff and Schiller, 1983), and adults' self esteem ratings have shown improvement in two studies (Kessler, 1978; and Thiessen, et. al., 1980) but not in one other (Salts and Zongker, 1983). One study also showed change in parent ratings of their childrens' anxiety following a parent workshop (Rugel and Sieracki, 1981). Other evaluation of group programs has not been reported. Now let me turn to the work that we have been doing in North Carolina.

The Parenting After Divorce Project:

The Parenting After Divorce Project began in 1980 with funds from NIMH. The purpose of the project was to design and evaluate preventive educational programs for families going through divorce. Three educational programs were designed and are in the process of being evaluated: Parent groups, Family Education, and Self Study. The major goal of the programs is to help families cope more effectively with divorce and prevent additional stress for the children.

With this as a goal, our parent groups were designed to give parents information and skills to help their children. The groups were designed empirically, using information about the effects of divorce on children and parents from research by Wallerstein and Kelly, Hetherington, and Jacobson, among others. These researchers had reported that parents often experience problems with their parenting in the first 2 years after divorce; thus information about parenting skills and active listening was included for the primary parents. To reduce family conflict and promote ongoing contact between parents and the children, information and skills about how to reduce interparent hostility was also provided. In retrospect, more active contact

with the non-custodial parents would also be recommended. However, when the programs were designed in 1979, we planned them for families in which the children had little contact with their second parent.

Families in a four county area of central North Carolina are contacted using public court records of divorce filings, and sent letters inviting them to participate. Where possible, telephone calls are made to potential participants. Families must have at least one child between the ages of 7 and 12, and not be in need of crisis psychiatric services. Because the programs are preventive in nature, families in which the target age child is in psychotherapy are excluded from the formal data analysis. Using this method of recruitment, and comparing the sample of participants with the courthouse population on available demographic information, we have found that we have reached a representative sample of divorcing families in our area. Before pre-testing by the research staff, families are assigned randomly to interventions, using a two step process. They are then assessed in three general areas: child adjustment, parent functioning, and family environment and interaction. Self report, parent report, observation measures and clinical ratings are used.

The Parent Groups:

The single parent groups are designed to provide information and skills training in a supportive atmosphere. The groups meet for five sessions, each lasting 1 1/2 - 2 hours. 5-8 single custodial parents make up each group, led by a male and female co-leader. Where possible, both male and female custodial parents are included in each group, to provide a balance of views for participants. Now let me describe the group sessions:

I. In the first group, the major goal is to discuss information about the reactions of children to the divorce of their parents. After introductions and setting of group ground rules members share their goals for attending. Then a lecture and discussion about the reactions of children to divorce follows, using material drawn from the research of Wallerstein and Kelly, Hetherington, and others, as well as from clinical works such as Ricci. Information about normal cognitive development of children is also given as context for the reactions to divorce.

II. The goal of the second group is to teach or review the parenting skill of active listening and direct expression of feelings between parents and children. The session begins with a brief lecturette about active listening, "I" messages, and congruency of words and feelings. After this, group members practice listening for feelings using vignettes provided by the group leaders. The leaders model accurate listening, and then coach parents in the exercise. The second half of the session is devoted to discussion and role play to help parents feel more comfortable talking to their children and answering their children's questions truthfully.

III. In the third session, the focus is on parent skills of limit-setting and negotiation. Divorce may disrupt the single parent's sense of competence as a parent, leading to either over-indulgence or rigid adherence to rules. The group discusses divorce issues which interfere with effective discipline including over reliance on the separated parent, fears of loss of the child, competition with and anger at the former spouse. Parenting skills such as clear and consistent expectations, use of praise rather than punishment, and specific rather than general feedback to children is included. Parents and leaders role play and practice skills are discussed.

IV. In the forth session, the focus is on the ongoing relationship between divorced parents. This session provides members with a vehicle to look at how they handle anger at their former spouses. Parents are given information about the child's continued need for an ongoing relationship with both parents, and suggestions and exercises are aimed at helping parents maintain PARENTAL relationships while ending the SPOUSAL relationship. Information from Ricci's (1980) book forms the basis of some of the discussion about how to facilitate workable co-parenting.

V. The last session is less structured than earlier meetings, and parents work on problem solving and planning for the future. Discussion centers on how to promote family health and to reduce stress. Parents work on setting priorities, and planning ways to meet some of their own needs. All exercises are aimed at increasing participants confidence in their abilities to cope. At the close of this session, each participant sets one goal to accomplish in the next 6 months.

Clinical Issues:

What sorts of clinical issues emerge in doing these groups?

A. Groups are educational--clinicians used to doing therapy groups may find themselves wanting to do more than the educational format allows. As one clinician said "These people have so many needs . . . we cannot address them all". We were able to recruite participants who would not have come for group therapy, nor did they feel that they needed that. Other clinicians, more comfortable with educational programs said "Each member got at least one thing from the sessions--they tended to really tune into one issue, but each member got something different."

B. To do an educational group, more leader control structure and direction is needed than in therapy groups. Leaders expressed the need for these groups to move quickly. (Although this would be eased by adding 2-3 more sessions). Divorcing parents have many needs, and often have very different divorce experiences. The leaders need to structure the group, keeping members on track, and redirecting the discussion if one member monopolises group time.

C. Structure vs. Unstructured groups: Like Sheila Kessler, we found that the structured groups were much prefered by the participants to unstructured groups. Consumer satisfaction ratings were very high for these groups--the highest of any done at the mental health center. In one group the leaders began the group in a less structured format; this group got the lowest ratings of any other, rather than the excellent ratings of the other groups. Clinicians complained that the groups seemed packed with material, and more time on each topic may be helpful. It is clear to us, though, that structured "classes" are perceived as more helpful by group members than "support" grour formats.

D. Working through separation issues while talking about the logistics of parenting: What about the focus being solely on parenting--can the groups address other issues of the parents? A number of leaders commented that parents were able to work through some of their personal issues about separation and autonomy using the vehicle of talking about parenting. For example, parents who had relied on the former spouse for discipline, had to decide what standards they wanted, and put them into practice independently. Other parents found themselves still catering to the former spouses wishes (e.g. in rule setting at their own home) and worked on establishing their own authority. Others learned to "give up control" of events in the child's other home during the group.

E. What works and what doesn't: The kinds of things that seem to work best are lots of role play; use of humor; leaders can be playful, and exaggerate roles of former spouses which allows members to get some perspective; variety; active listening exercises are very useful but hard unless there is time enough for practice; parents want and can use lots of practical concrete suggestions, and some may want homework assignments. Group leaders accustomed to therapy groups were surprised when group members were "so active and healthy" in that they could reach out quickly to each other, and utilize material used very quickly.

F. Recruitment and screening of participants: Members for these groups were recruited from public court records, but other methods of contacting interested people are viable in a clinical setting. We found we were able to reach parents who would not otherwise have sought a mental health service, by using the court records. Only one criteria was used to screen out group members--if they appeared in need of crisis intervention. One other group of individuals does seem to have difficulty benefitting from the groups--those who continue to experience high levels of anger/rage, and who still continue an obsessive review of the marriage one year after the separation. These individuals were problematic in groups since they tended to monopolize group time and attempt to get members to "take sides." (Weiss also reports this finding about who can benefit from groups.) In addition, it helped to have at least one male member in each group, as well as the male co-therapist. In groups in which there was a custodial father all the members felt that the broader perspective had been very valuable and helped to counteract stereotyping "all men", or "all fathers . . ." sometimes seen in all women's groups.

G. When should groups be offered: Because of limitations of the research design and the State Law in North Carolina (which requires a 12 month separation before filing for divorce, and does not require legal separation), these groups were offered to parents approximately one year after separation. Parents gave two types of responses when asked about the timing of groups: "I wish I had had it earlier." and "I could not have handled the material about my children before now, I was just surviving before." Results from other states (for example Stolberg, (1983) in Virginia) suggest that parents need different types of material at different points in time, with more attention to issues of grief, loss and self esteem and coping around the time of the separation, and the material about parenting later on in the transition process (Weiss, 1976). Despite the fact that most parents had established some set ways of handling visitation and their former spouse at the time of the interventions, we found that most parents could reopen these issues and rework this relationship. While some of the material on visitation and co-parenting would be useful earlier, for some families it may simply have to wait until the acute pain and anger have subsided somewhat. Thus, we agree with parents that services should be offered earlier, but we also found that the parenting groups were welcomed by parents well into the second year after separation.

H. Leader preparation and qualifications: We found that groups took a good deal of preparation time initially, because of the range of educational material which had to be mastered. Leaders for the groups came from a wide range of mental health backgrounds, including psychology, social work, psychiatric nursing and counseling. Leaders need to be able to be active and structure the experiences, as well as feel freer than in a therapy group to give concrete suggestions, and facilitate group input. We found it helpful to

have at least one leader who had children; and a leader sharing divorce experience was also helpful in several groups.

Consumer satisfaction ratings were uniformly high for the groups, and parents expressed preference for these groups over support groups.

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